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The threat posed by Sandinistas at center of debate

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WASHINGTON — The debate over President Reagan's \$100 million aid package for the Nicaraguan contras, which will be voted on in the House today, has raised searching questions about what danger the leftist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua poses to the United States — and what should be done about it.

Reagan has maintained that the issue boils down to a question of whether there will be "a communist takeover of Central America" that, in turn, will see a "red tide" lapping against America's borders.

Congressional Democrats argue in opposition that Reagan is advocating a military approach to the problem that, as Sen. Jim Sasser (D., Tenn.), put it, could lead to "direct U.S. military involvement in a long and costly and bloody war."

There has been no significant debate in Congress over whether the Sandinistas represent a potential threat to their Central American neighbors. But few Democrats agree with Reagan's contention that the future of the region, East-West relations and possibly the American way of life may hang in the balance.

Instead, they argue that Reagan's four-year-old policy of supporting the contras has failed and holds no prospect for success in the future. Said Rep. Albert G. Bustamante (D., Texas), "Serious diplomacy has not been given an opportunity. We say, give peace a chance."

Here are some of the major questions that have emerged in the debate and the responses offered by each side:

Importance of the issue. Reagan clearly believes that his presidency may be deemed a failure by historians if a Soviet-oriented communist regime succeeds in consolidating itself while he is in office. He believes he must do everything he can to prevent the Sandinistas from becoming entrenched.

Reagan began covertly funding the contras through the CIA in 1982, during his second year in office, and has made contra support the central element of his Nicaragua policy.

He described the Sandinista challenge in apocalyptic terms in a nationally televised speech Sunday night. "Using Nicaragua as a base," he said, "the Soviets and the Cubans

can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean Sea lanes and ultimately move against Mexico."

Reagan's rhetoric also contained some apparent misstatements of fact. He said that "top Nicaraguan government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking" — an allegation the Drug Enforcement Administration says it has no evidence to support — and that "radicals" from Brazil were receiving military training there — a statement that surprised and irritated the Brazilian government this week.

In opposing Reagan, the Democratic-controlled House Intelligence Committee said that its position was "not a vote for communism or a vote for Soviet expansionism in Central America, rather it is a vote against a failed policy..."

Delivering the Democrats' response to Reagan's speech, Sasser said: "We agree that Nicaragua must never become a base for Soviet military adventurism in this hemisphere. Never. Our disagreement is with the means the president has used to achieve these goals."

Objectives. The administration's specific objectives have always been murky.

When the CIA's covert funding of the contras was revealed in 1983, Reagan said the effort was designed to interdict the flow of military supplies to Salvadoran guerrillas. Contra leaders, however, said their objective was to overthrow the Sandinista government.

Last year Reagan said the U.S. objective was to make the Sandinistas "cry uncle."

Last Sunday on NBC's *Meet the Press*, White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan said: "We have a very aggressive communist nation on our hemisphere for the first time

... We have to get rid of it in some way or another."

And a White House spokesman said in an interview this week that the U.S. objective was to "bring about power-sharing" between the Sandinistas and the contras.

The Democrat-controlled House Foreign Affairs Committee said in a March 11 report that it did not disagree with Reagan's feelings about the Sandinistas — only with the administration's "tactics ... of hostility and military pressure against Nicaragua ...

"This policy has never had a clearly defined objective ... It [The policy] has done little to ameliorate the aspects of the Nicaraguan government's behavior that are most troublesome to the United States — its military buildup, its military relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union, its support for insurgencies against its neighbors and its restrictions on internal freedom."

Ability of the contras. Reagan has praised the contras as "freedom fighters" who have "pinned down the Sandinista army and bought the people of Central America precious time."

In his televised speech, he said that the contra force "has grown dramatically in strength. Today it numbers more than 20,000 volunteers, and more come every day." Reagan blamed setbacks suffered by the rebels on shortages of supplies and a lack of defenses against modern Soviet helicopter gunships.

But reports from Nicaragua indicate that the contras have no more than 6,000 to 7,000 active fighters, mostly in Honduras, and that they have failed to demonstrate a desire to fight. Moreover, a congressional study shows that at least a dozen of the top contra leaders were members of former dictator Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, which has been accused of killing and torturing the dictator's opponents.

Said Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D., N.Y.): "If the administration's goal regarding Nicaragua is the replacement of the Sandinista regime ... then arming the contras will not do the job. Their deficiencies in leadership, morale, training and political support outweigh whatever material aid they may receive."

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Negotiations. Reagan, in his speech Sunday, declared, "We have sought — and still seek — a negotiated peace and a democratic future in a free Nicaragua. Ten times we have met and tried to reason with the Sandinistas. Ten times we were rebuffed."

But the House Foreign Affairs Committee report said there were "serious questions whether the administration had pursued diplomacy to the fullest extent possible . . . Unilateral military pressure has taken precedence over serious diplomacy, rather than being held as a last resort when diplomatic efforts have been exhausted."

The House Intelligence Committee has said there is no "convincing evidence" to support the administration's claims that it has supported the Contadora peace process for the region developed by Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama — all of which have urged Reagan to cut off aid to the contras.